


The House Beautiful



William C. Gannett



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THE HOUSE BEAUTIFUL.

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BY
WILLIAM C. GANNETT



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The House Beautiful.



THERE is a Bible verse that reads,
"A building of God, a house not
made with hands." Paul meant the
spiritual body in which, he says, the
soul will live hereafter. But how
well the words describe the Home,—
a home right here on earth!

"Except the Lord build the
house"—

In a sense worth noting the very
house itself, the mere shell of the

home, is that—"a building of God, not made with hands." Watch two birds foraging to build their nest. They preëempt a crook in a bough or a hole in the wall, some tiny niche or other in the big world, and, singing to each other that this is their tree-bough, their hole, they bring a twig from here, a wisp of hay from there, a tuft of soft moss, the tangle of string which the school-boy dropped, the hair that the old horse rubbed off on the pasture-bars, and weave and mould their findings into a cosy bowl to hold their little ones. Man and woman are but larger birds, borrowing more of the world-material to make

a bigger bowl a little cosier. From a fellow-mortal they buy a lot or a farm instead of a tree-bough; they fence it in and call it theirs, as if they owned the acres through to China,—and put a mortgage on it, notwithstanding, because it is too large to pay for. Then they build four walls with a lid, to box in a little of the blowing wind; screw on this box a door-plate and insurance-sign; divide it inside into chambered cells; line these cells with paper and carpets instead of moss and horse-hair; and proceed to fill their pretty box of cells with decorations and conveniences. This is their “home.” “See what my hands have

built!" says the man. But if we look with eyes that do see, what we see is this;—that all he calls his handiwork is nothing but the bird's work; first, a foraging on Nature for material, then a re-arranging, re-combining of the plunder.

For consider the house, how it grows! The first thing we do is to dig a hole in the planet,—a socket to hold the house down firm. That is taking liberties with Nature to begin with, as we only make the hole, she room for the hole,—the more momentous matter. Then the cellar-walls,—do we *make* them? We quarry the stone, drag it out, chip it square, lay it in

the mortar-beds; but the stone was laid in the quarry for us atom by atom, crystal by crystal, ages before the first man trod the earth. A bit of pavement from Pompeii, a fragment from the pyramids, is prized because man's touch was on it two thousand or thrice two thousand years ago; but each pebble in the chinks of the cellar-wall beneath us holds thousands of thousands of years locked up in it, since first the ancient oceans sifted it and inner earth-fires baked it and thickening continents began to squeeze it into rock.

Then over these foundations we lay the sills and raise the frame. But who

made the timber in the joist, who *made* the clapboards and the shingles on the roof? Men hewed and sawed and split,—the great mills with their iron claws and iron teeth are wonders of human skill; but what hands took sunshine and the rain and a pine-cone a hundred years ago in a wild forest, and with winter storms and spring freshenings and long summer shinings built up the countless cells and fibres into the great green tree, that waited on the hill-side till the axe-man came?

And thus we might consider each and everything about our house, the iron in the nail, the wool in the carpet, the glass in the window, the

paint on the door, the hair in the easy chair, and trace all back by no long road to builders who build not by hand. We are proud of our nineteenth century mansion; but if we use the very latest improvements and most artificial,—make its outer walls of machine-pressed stone; for inner walls buy fibrous slabs instead of laths and mortar; iron-rib it through and through in place of floor-beams; fire-proof its floors with iron-netting and plaster; warm it by steam from boilers two miles away down town; light it with electricity; tune it by reverberating telephones with music played in a distant capital; dine in it, as to-day

the city-dwellers may, on fresh fish from the gulf of the St. Lawrence, fresh beef from Montana, fresh pears from California—still, what are we doing but coaxing a little more of world-material from Mother Nature than the forefathers had learnt the art of coaxing from her when they were furnishing their plain log huts? Foraging on Nature like the birds, and re-arranging the plunder,—that is all there is of it.

“I heard a voice out of heaven,” says another Bible verse,—“a great voice out of heaven, ‘Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they

shall be his people.'” Call the great Power “God,” or by what name we will, that Power dwells with us in so literal a fashion that every stone and rafter, every table, spoon and paper scrap, bears stamp and signature to eyes that read aright: “The house in which we live is a building of God, a house not made with hands.”



House-furnishing.

I^N this immanence of miracle, this domestication of the infinite, we have not gone beyond the bare house yet. But how much more than house is *Home*! Cellar and walls and roof, chairs and tables and spoons,—these are the mere shell of the Home. These, to be sure, are what the young couple talk much about when waiting for the wedding, and this is what the architects and carpenters and house-furnishing stores are for. And under city slates and country shingles alike, one sometimes finds unfortunates to

whom this mere outside, these solid things about the rooms, seem to be mainly what they think of when they think of the rooms; unfortunates to whom the show of their furniture is of more importance than its use; men more interested in the turkey on the table than in the people who sit around the turkey; women who think more of the new carpet than the blessing of the old sunshine; men and women, both, who bear witness that they love their neighbors better than themselves by keeping best things for the neighbors' eyes and the worst things for their own, and who almost gauge their social standing by the fine clothes

they can put on for street or church, or by the "dead perfection" of their front parlor. Perhaps the good wife, looking around a slovenly, *unhome-like* living-room, feels a flush of self-respect at the thought of that cold front parlor, where the chairs sit as straight as the pictures ought to, and the tapestries and crockeries are each in the due place. When calling at a rich man's home and waiting for Madame to appear, sometimes a silent wonder rises, "Do the people correspond to all this gilt and varnish and upholstery?" And in a humbler house, when shown into one of those polar parlors, a kind of homesickness comes over one for

some *back* parlor, some kitchen, a bedroom, *any* place where the people really live. The heart cries, "Take me where the people stay; I didn't come to see the chairs." A second thought is apt to follow,—how much more pleasant, tasteful, home-like every other room in the house would probably become, if the expense hidden in this one room were but distributed, there in a prettier paper, there in a quieter carpet, there in a noble picture, and all about in a dozen little graces and conveniences,—if these were added *there*, where all the time they would be enjoyed by the owners and the users. On the other hand, one is sometimes shown

into a room, on entering which he feels like bowing to its emptiness in gratitude, because it offers, even bare of the people who evidently do live in it, a festival so cosy to the eyes. Everywhere are uses in forms of beauty. *Uses in forms of beauty*,—that is the secret of a festival for eyes. In such cases it is quite in order to sing our little psalm praising the good looks of the room and the things in it that make it pleasant. That is what they are for,—to please; in part, to please us, the chance-comers; but not us first, and the home-folk last,—the home-folk first, and us outsiders last. Petition to see a friend's

own room before feeling that you really know that friend. It is a better test than a bureau-drawer! Not the room after a quick run up-stairs for two minutes first, but the room just as it is. For a room as it is usually kept is index of one's taste, of one's culture, and of a good deal of one's character.



The Ideal of Beauty.

I AM not objecting one whit to grace in the household furnishings, nor to expense laid out to get the grace. On the contrary, there is nothing beyond bare necessities on which expense may be so well laid out. As the elementary thing that shows one's house is not merely a hand-made house, I would name *Taste*; the taste that shows itself in pictures, in flowers, in music, in the choice of colors for the walls and the floors, in the amenities of the mantel-piece and table, in the grouping of the furniture,

in the droop of the curtains at the windows, in the way in which the dishes glorify the table, in which the dresses sit on the mother and the girls. And it is the morning dress and the Monday table that tells the story. Where can you buy good taste? *That* cannot be manu-factured. Like Solomon's "wisdom," it cannot be gotten for gold, nor silver be paid for the price thereof; but in house-furnishing it is more precious than fine rubies. It is the one thing that no store in New York or Chicago sells, nor can rich relatives leave you any of it in their wills. And yet it comes largely by bequest. Nearly all

one can tell about its origin is that it gathers slowly in the family blood, and refines month by month, as children watch the parents' ways and absorb into themselves the grace that is about the rooms.

But what a difference it makes to those children by and by! What a difference it makes in the feeling of the home, if things graceful to the eye and ear are added to the things convenient for the flesh and bones! Our eyes and ears are parts of us; if less important than the heart and mind, still are parts of us, and a home should be home for all our parts. Eyes and ears are eager to be

fed with harmonies in color and form and sound; these are their natural food as much as bread and meat are food for other parts. And in proportion as the eyes and ears are fed, we are not sure, but apt, to see a fineness spreading over life. Where eyes and ears are starved, we are not sure, but apt, to find a roughness spreading. A song at even-time before the little ones say Good-night; the habit of together saying a Good-morning grace to God, perhaps a silent grace, among the other greetings of a happy breakfast-table; a picture in that bare niche of the wall; a vase of flowers on the mantel-piece; well matched colors

under foot; a nestling collar, not that stiff band, around the neck; brushed boots, if boots it must be, when the family are all together; the tea-table tastefully, however simply, set, instead of dishes in a huddle,—these all are little things; you would hardly notice them as single things; you would not call them “religion,” they are not “morals,” they scarcely even class under the head of “manners.” Men and women can be good parents and valuable citizens without them. And yet, and yet, one cannot forget that, as the years run on, these trifles of the home will make no little of the difference between coarse grain and

fine grain in us and in our children, when they grow up.

Besides, this taste for grace is nothing hard to gratify in these days. It is much harder to get the good taste than the means by which to gratify it. Not splendor, but harmony, is grace; not many things, but picturesque things. The ideals of beauty are found in simple, restful things far oftener than in ornate things. Of two given forms for the same article—a chair, a table, a dress—the form that is least ornate is commonly the more useful, and this more useful form will commonly by artist eyes be found the handsomer. A man in his working-

clothes is usually more picturesque than that same man in his Sunday clothes; the living-room more picturesque than the parlor. "Avoid the superfluous," is a recipe that of itself would clear our rooms of much unhandsome handsomeness. Scratch out the *verys* from your talk, from your writing, from your house-furnishing. A certain sentence, only eight words long, did me great good as a young man. I met it in Grimm's Life of Michael Angelo: "*The ideal of beauty is simplicity and repose.*" The ideal of beauty is simplicity and repose: it applies to everything,—to wall-papers and curtains and carpets and table-

cloths, to dress, to manners, to talk, to sermons, to style in writing, to faces, to character. The ideal of beauty is simplicity and repose,—not flash, not sensation, not show, not exaggeration, not bustle. And because simple, beautiful things are not necessarily costly, it needs no mint of money to have really choice pictures on one's wall, now that photography has been invented, and the sun shines to copy Raphael's Madonna and Millet's peasants and William Hunt's boys and maidens for us, or the sculpture of an Alpine valley and a cathedral front. A very little outlay, the dinners cheapened for a month,

will make the bare dining-room so beautiful that plain dinners ever afterwards taste better in it; it really is economy and saves a course.



Flower Furniture.

AND without any money at all, what grace the fields and gardens offer us, if only we have eyes to see it, hearts to love it, hands to carry it home! I knew a woman, among friends counted poor, whose room was a place to go around and praise and be thankful and delighted for, so much did she have of this faculty of transferring nature to the inside of a house. Mosses and ferns and dried autumn-leaves were her chief materials; but the eyes and the hands and the taste were added in, and rich men

could not buy her result. To be a *growing* flower anywhere is to be beautiful. "Consider the lilies," said the young Hebrew prophet; and when we do consider them, we want some of them nearer than the field. The Arabs put into Mahomet's, their prophet's, lips the saying: "If a man find himself with bread in both hands, he should exchange one loaf for some flowers of the narcissus, since the loaf feeds the body indeed, but the flowers feed the soul." Flowers have no speech nor language, but they are living creatures, and, when transplanted from their own home-haunts to ours, they claim the captive's due

of tenderness, and they will reward love, like a child, with answering loveliness. In their religious rhyming to the woods and fields outside, the seasons faithfully remembered in captivity, their wondrous resurrections, their mystic chemistry that in our corner bed-rooms carries on Creation, constructing green leaf and glowing petal and strange incense out of earth and water and the window sunlight, the little exiles of the flower-pot bear mute witness that the house wherein they live is "a building of God, a house not made with hands."

Book Furniture.

WE must say a word about two other things, seldom thought of as house-furnishings. One of them is our *Books*. Think what a "book" means. It means meeting a dime-novel hero, if we like that kind of hero. But it also means meeting the poets, the thinkers, the great men, the genuine heroes, if we like that kind. It means admission to the new marvels of science, if one choose admission. It means an introduction to the noblest company that all the generations have generated, if we claim

the introduction. Remembering this, how can one help wishing to furnish his house with some such furniture? A poet for a table-piece! A philosopher upon the shelf! Tyndall and Darwin, in their works, for members of the household! Browning or Emerson for a fireside friend! Irving or Dickens or George Eliot to make us laugh and cry and grow tender to queer folk and forlorn! Or some of the good newspapers,—not those that, on the plea of giving “news,” parade details of the divorces and the murders gleaned from Maine to Florida, details of the brute game of the prize-fighter and the shames of

low city life,—not this red, rank meat to hang around one's mind, as if it were a butcher's shop; but newspapers that tell how the great world is moving on in politics and business and thought and knowledge and humanity. To subscribe for one of these last is truest house-furnishing. A family's rank in thought and taste can be well gauged by the books and papers that lie upon the shelf or table in the living-room. There are three or four books which a man *owes* to his family as much as he owes them dinner or clothes,—a good newspaper (that is, one new book daily), a good dictionary, a good atlas, and, if he can

possibly afford it, a good cyclopædia. A boy asked his mother a difficult question and got the answer, "I don't know." "Well," said he, "I think mothers *ought* to know. They ought to be well educated, or else have an encyclopædia." That boy was right. And if we own no more than these four books just named, they are four presences to day and night remind us that their house and ours is a house not wholly "made with hands."



Our Guests.

ANOTHER thing which passes manufacture is our *Guests*. They are surely as important a part of the household furniture as the chairs we buy for them to sit on. A house that merely holds its inmates, and to the rest of the town is a barred place, good, like a prison, to keep out of, can hardly be a "home" to those who live in it. It must be pleasant to a woman to know the children like to look up at her windows as they run to school, hoping for her smile; it must be a pleasure to a man to know

the neighbors look forward to an evening around his fireside or a chat and laugh over his tea-table. The truest hospitality is shown not in the effort to entertain, but in the depth of welcome. What a guest loves to come, and come again, for is not the meal, but those who sit at the meal. If we remembered this, more homes would be habitually thrown open to win the benedictions upon hospitality. It is our ceremony, not our poverty, it is self-consciousness oftener than inability to be agreeable, that makes us willing to live cloistered. Seldom is it that the pleasantest homes to visit are the richest. The real com-

pliment is *not* to apologize for the simple fare. That means trust, and trust is better than fried oysters. One of my dearest haunts used to be a home where we had bread and butter for the fare, and the guest helped to toast the bread and wipe the dishes; but the welcome and the children and the wit and the songs, and the quiet talk after the children went to bed, made it a rare privilege to be admitted there. If the dinner be a loaf of bread and a pitcher of water, invite your friend rather than incur that opposite reputation, that it is "a kind of burglary to ring your door-bell before dinner." Count guests who are

always glad to come and always make you glad they come, as best pieces in your household furnishing; and those who are glad to come, without the power of making us so glad,—count some of these as reasons why the house was built.



The dear "Togetherness."

AND still one thing remains to furnish the House Beautiful;—the most important thing of all, without which guests and books and flowers and pictures and harmonies of color only emphasize the fact that the house is not a home. I mean the warm light in the rooms that comes from kind eyes, from quick unconscious smiles, from gentleness in tones, from little unpremeditated caresses of manner, from habits of fore-thoughtfulness for one another,—all that happy illumination which, on the inside of

a house, corresponds to morning sunlight outside falling on quiet dewy fields. It is an atmosphere really generated of many self-controls, of much forbearance, of training in self-sacrifice; but by the time it reaches instinctive expression these stern generators of it are hidden in the radiance resulting. It is like a constant love-song without words, whose meaning is, "We are glad that we are alive *together*." It is a low pervading music, felt, not heard, which begins each day with the Good-morning, and only ends in the dream-drowse beyond Good-night. It is cheer; it is peace; it is trust; it is delight; it

is all these for, and all these in, each other. It knows no moods—this warm love-light,—but is an even cheer, an even trust. The little festivals of love are kept, but, after all, the best days are the every-days because they *are* the every-days of love. The variant dispositions in the members of the home, the elements of personality to be “allowed for,” add stimulus and exhilaration to this atmosphere. Shared memories make part of it, shared hopes and fears, shared sorrows; shared self-denials make a very dear part of it.

Thus is it at its happy best; but even when the home-love is not at its

best, when moods at times prevail, and cold looks make a distance in the eyes, and some one grows recluse and selfish to the rest, even then the average and wont of love may keep the home not wholly undeserving of its coronation name, "a building of God, a house not made with hands." Certainly love is the force by which, and home the place in which, God chiefly fashions souls to their fine issues. Is our mere body fearfully and wonderfully made? A greater marvel is the human mind and heart and conscience. To make these, homes spring up the wide world over. In them strength fits itself to weakness,

experience fits itself to ignorance, protection fits itself to need. They are life-schools in which the powers of an individual are successively awaked and trained as, year by year, he passes on through the differing relations of child, youth, parent, elder, in the circle. From the child's relations to the others come obedience, reverence, trust,—the roots of upward growth. Youth's new relations bring self-control and self-reliance, justice, and the dawns of duty owed one's world. Later, when little ones in turn demand our care, mother-providence and father-providence emerge in us, and energies of self-forgetting, and the full response

of human nature to the great appeal to be good for love's sake. Lastly, old age with its second leisure and dependence brings moderation, patience, peace, and a sense of wide horizons opening. And, all the process through, love is the shaping force, and home-relations are the well-springs of the love.

If this may be called the story of soul-making for us all, of none is it so mystically, beautifully true a story as of the blessed "twos." *Mystically* true of them, because the love of twos begins in miracle, and the miracle never wholly dies away even when the days of Golden

Wedding near. A mystery like that of birth and that of death is the mystery of two young spirits all unconsciously through distant ways approaching, each fated at some turn, some instant, to find and recognize the other. Follows, then, the second and continuing mystery of the two becoming very one. And *beautifully* true of them,—as all beholders know: “all men love a lover.” Poetry and song, and novel and drama, and gossip, older than them all, attest the fascination. But to the two themselves how passing beautiful the story is! It is not merely that all Nature glows and old familiar

things take on new lights and meanings; nor merely that in the new light the dearest old ties dim by some divine eclipse,

“As o’er the hills and far away
Beyond their utmost purple rim,
Beyond the night, beyond the day,
The happy princess follows him.”

Not merely this: a higher beauty comes in the changes so swiftly wrought by love within each soul,—the enlargement of powers, the enhancement of attractiveness, the virtues greatened, the meanness abated, and that *unselfing* of each one for the other’s sake, which really makes each one a

stronger, nobler self. The sunrise of the new life breaks. The two are mated with the solemn questions: "Wilt thou love her, honor her, cherish and comfort her, in health and in sickness, in joy and in sorrow, so long as ye both shall live?" "Wilt thou take him for richer, for poorer, for better, for worse, and try to live with him the divinest life thou knowest?" Then begin the daily, hourly answers to these questions,—living answers so different from the worded "I will" of the moment.

And now the home-nest, and the delights of it, the discoveries of it,

the revelations in it of still unmated parts which yet must mate and will, the glad endeavors of it, all begin. Now poems, only making dear a printed page a little while before, sing themselves out as glad experience :

“Two birds within one nest ;
 Two hearts within one breast ;
 Two souls within one fair
 Firm league of love and prayer,
 Together bound for aye, together blest ;
 An ear that waits to catch
 A hand upon the latch ;
 A step that hastens its sweet rest to win ;
 A world of care without ;
 A world of strife shut out ;
 A world of love shut in !”

Slowly the new home grows holy as the deepening wedding thus goes on; holy, for the making of two souls—two yet one—is going on in it. Each soul is overcoming its own faults for love's sake, and helping by love to overcome the other's faults. Business, sorrows, joys, temptations, failures, victories, ideals, are all shared in it. By and by the awes of motherhood and fatherhood are shared, and the new co-education that children bring their parents is entered on together. The supreme beauty is attained when both realize that the inmost secret of true marriage is—*to love the ideals better than*

each other. For this alone guarantees the perfect purity, and therefore this alone can guarantee the lastingness of love. Literally, literally so!

“I could not love thee, dear, so much,
Loved I not honor more.”

Emerson's words are the motto for all marriage-chambers: “They only can give the key and leading to better society *who delight in each other only because both delight in the eternal laws*; who forgive nothing to each other; who by their joy and homage to these are made incapable of conceit.” And so the divine end

of beauty is fulfilled—the purification of souls, the ennoblement of personality.

By far the best love-story that I know among the books is a true one, “The Story of William and Lucy Smith”; a sad, triumphant love-story that leads the reader far along the heights of life and death. These two had no children at their side; they had no wealth to buy them graceful things; their very roof they could not call their own; and they only lived eleven years together. But they lived these years a lofty life in all the full sweet meanings of *together*. “To-

getherness" is the quaint word in which Lucy tried to sum and hint the happiness.

So when I think of the House Beautiful, "the building of God, not made with hands," I think of them. *He* said to her, looking up into her face not long before his death: "I think you and I should have made a happy world, if we were the only two in it." *She* said of him, closing the little memoir that she wrote: "Of him every memory is sweet and elevating; and I record here that a life-long anguish, such as defies words, is yet not too high a price to pay for the privilege

of having loved him and belonged
to him."

I dreamed of Paradise,—and still,
Though sun lay soft on vale and hill,
And trees were green and rivers bright,
The one dear thing that made delight
By sun or stars or Eden weather,
Was just that we two were together.

I dreamed of Heaven,—and God so
near !
The angels trod the shining sphere,
And all were beautiful ; the days
Were choral work, were choral praise ;
And yet, in Heaven's far-shining
weather,
The best was still,—we were to-
gether !

I woke — and found my dream was
true,

That happy dream of me and you !
For Eden, Heaven, no need to roam ;
The foretaste of it all is *Home*,

Where you and I through this
world's weather

Still work and praise and thank
together.

Together weave from love a nest
For all that's good and sweet and blest
To brood in, till it come a face,
A voice, a soul, a child's embrace !

And then what peace of Beth-
lehem weather,

What songs, as we go on together !

Together greet life's solemn real,
Together own one glad ideal,

Together laugh, together ache,
And think one thought, "each other's
sake,"
And hope one hope — in *new-world*
weather
To still go on, and go together.



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